
THE
Church of the Living God:

A SERMON,

DELIVERED BY

REV. EDWIN H. NEVIN.

Pastor of St. Paul's German Reformed Church,

LANCASTER, PA., JULY 4th, 1869



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Translation of A. B. Stumm

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CORRESPONDENCE.

MILLERSVILLE, July 19, 1869.

Rev. EDWIN H. NEVIN.

Dear Sir :—By a resolution of the Consistory of the German Reformed Congregation at Millersville, I have been authorized to request of you, for publication, a copy of the Sermon you preached at Millersville, on the 4th of July inst., on the occasion of the installation of Rev. A. B. SHENKLE as Pastor of the Millersville Charge. I, therefore, in compliance with said resolution, respectfully request a copy of said Sermon for publication. Hoping that you may grant this request,

I remain yours truly,

CHARLES DENUES.

C. DENUES, Esq.

I herewith, in accordance with your request, transmit you a copy of the Sermon referred to. The sentiments it contains are thoroughly in harmony with the Protestant Evangelical Churches of our land, and what is still more important, are, as I am fully persuaded, in accordance with the Word of God, which is the "*Regula Fidei*."

Yours truly,

EDWIN H. NEVIN.

LANCASTER, PA., Aug. 2, 1869.

THE CHURCH OF THE LIVING GOD.

“The house of God, which is the Church of the Living God.”

—1 *Timothy*, iii: 15.

The Epistles to Timothy and Titus occupy a very important place in the New Testament. They not only instruct the persons to whom they were originally addressed, in the work to which they were specifically appointed, but they counsel the ministry in every age and in every land. It is obvious that the character and welfare of the church depend greatly, if not entirely, on the character of the ministry. The office of the ministry is God's great appointment for the preservation of pure religion, and for spreading it through the world. The Church adheres to the truth; is built up in faith; is distinguished for intelligence and love, and purity and zeal, in proportion as the ministry is of a right character and shows itself qualified for its work. In every age corruption in the Church has commenced in the ministry; and where the gospel has been spread abroad with zeal, and the Church has arisen in her

strength and beauty, it has been pre-eminently where the true ministers of Christ have labored, and have worked in accordance with the laws of Christ's Kingdom. So important, indeed, is the office of the ministry to the Church and the world, that it was desirable that full instructions should be furnished in the volume of Revelation in regard to its nature and design. Such instruction we have in these Epistles to Timothy and Titus.

The design of the writer of this Epistle in the verse from which our text is selected is to impress Timothy with a deep sense of the importance of correct conduct in relation to the Church. He reminds him that the truth of God—that revealed truth which he had given to save the world—was entrusted to the Church;—that it was designed to preserve it pure, to defend it, and to transmit it to future times; and that, therefore, every one to whom the administration of the affairs of the Church was intrusted, should engage in this duty with a deep conviction of his responsibility.

The Apostle's words, as contained in the text, present to us three ideas:

1. The Church of God.
2. That Church a house.
3. That house the house of God.

We will notice them in the order here given.

1. *The Church of God.* On a careful examination of all the places in the New Testament in which the word "Church" occurs, *four* distinct applications of it may be found. There are, we believe, no others.

First. It is applied to particular congregations or

local societies of Christians, as “the Church at Jerusalem,” “the Church of God at Corinth,” “the Church of the Thessalonians,” and “the Seven Churches of Asia.”

Second. It is applied to a small association of believers meeting together in a private house. “Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house” (1 Cor. xvi: 19). “Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house” (Col. iv: 15).

Third. It is also used several times to signify all the churches that are in existence at the same time on the earth, all baptized persons, the whole body of *professing* christians, wherever dispersed, or however distinguished; what we generally mean when we say, the visible church of Christ.

Fourth. In the highest, best, and most important sense, the word “Church” is applied to all *real believers* in the Lord Jesus, that have been, or are, or shall hereafter be; the whole number of the redeemed from among men, whether on earth or in heaven.

This last is indeed eminently the Church of God;—of the Living God. This is what God generally means when he speaks in the Scripture of his Church. It is this which he is said to have loved and to have given himself for. It is this that he styles his “Glorious Church,” and that he calls by so many endearing names and represents under so many endearing symbols. This is the Body of Christ. This is the Bride. This is the Lamb’s wife. This is the Flock of Christ. This is the Household of Faith and Family of God. This is the Church of the First-born, whose names are written in heaven. This is the royal Priesthood, the

chosen generation, the peculiar people, the purchased possession, the habitation of God, the light of the world, the salt of the earth. This is the Church to which the Lord Jesus promises "the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it," and to which he says "I am with you always even unto the end of the world."

This Church we will now consider in a more particular light.

II. It is a *House*. Three things are required to constitute a *house*:—A foundation—materials for the superstructure,—and putting these materials together into order and form.

This House has a foundation. "Behold," saith the Lord, "I lay in Zion a chief corner stone, and he that *believeth* on him shall not be confounded." St. Peter in quoting these words explains them by saying, "To whom coming as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God and precious, ye also as lively stones are built up a spiritual house." St. Paul also speaks to the same effect, "Ye are God's building," he tells his Corinthian converts, and then he immediately alludes to Christ as the foundation of this building and the only one, "other foundation, he says, can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." Let us be careful that we get the whole literal reality of this doctrine. There is evidently a figure of speech in calling our Lord a "Stone," a "Corner Stone;" but there is no figure in making the whole church just as literally and immediately dependent on him personally for all its being, as a house is dependent on its foundation. The incarnation, life, doctrines, sufferings, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ enter into the very being of the church. The mere Incarnation of

Christ, however important a fact it may be in the great scheme of redemption, is not of itself sufficient to save men. If that were the whole of the gospel it might have been comprized in a very short space. It was the revelation of the wonderful life that became incarnate in the various forms which the gospel exhibits, that brought men into a right relationship to God and his government, and made them to share in his fellowship. Not only, therefore, did Christ found this church; not only does he enlighten and sustain it, and defend it, but he is personally and directly the life thereof: Because he is such to each individual believer, therefore he is the same to the whole company of believers. Does the single christian say, "for me to live is Christ." The whole mystical union of true christians, composing the Church of God, must say the same thing. It is only because all the building is in every individual part "framed together in Him," as its righteousness, in Him, as its sanctification, in Him, as all its strength and life, that it "groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord." Our blessed Lord is called "a *living Stone*," not so much because he lives;—"The lamb that was slain and is alive again for evermore;" as because he is the source, and centre, and power of life, to give and to sustain it in his people. "Our life is hid with Christ in God." It is all there, in the infinite depths, in the inexhaustible riches, in the inviolable security of that divine nature which is in him. Nothing short of Christ—Christ's righteousness, Christ's atonement, Christ in us, Christ without us, Christ risen, Christ alive at the right hand of God, yea "Christ all and in all" can meet the deep, immortal necessities of our souls. While the gates of Hell may

prevail against any or all of the outward, visible, professing churches, they cannot prevail against *this* true, holy catholic church, because the seat, and source, and power of its life are not in the world, not in man, not in any community of men, or class of Priestly officials, but in that one "Living Stone," the Incarnate Redeemer.

2. What are the materials for the superstructure erected upon this foundation? We might safely presume, that when God would undertake to build a house, he would make the superstructure correspond with the foundation. This, according to his own teachings, he did. "Living Stones" are built upon Christ, "a Living Stone." "To whom coming," says Peter, "as unto a Living Stone, ye also as *lively* stones, are built up a *spiritual house*." What is the doctrine taught here? Evidently that none but living stones compose that house—that the stones of the walls must be conformed to the stone of the corner. Because He lives, they must live also. In other words, a dead christian, if such incongruous terms can be united,—a mere professor of religion, a mere thing taking its name and standing, simply from the application of external ordinances, without Christ dwelling in him by his Spirit, can have no membership in Christ's true church,—can form no part in the glorious structure of God's spiritual house. Archbishop Usher truly remarks, "If Christ's quickening Spirit be wanting in any, no *external* communion with Christ can make him a member of Christ's mystical body, this being a most sure principle, that he which hath not the Spirit of Christ is none of his."

A question naturally arises which may be well to answer just here. The question is this: How are the

dead stones out of the quarry of our ruined nature made alive in Christ? Simply, answers the Apostle, by being brought unto Christ. "To *whom coming*, as unto a Living Stone, ye also as lively stones are built up a spiritual house." And again, says our blessed Lord, "Ye will not come unto *me* that ye might have life." These words of St. Peter and our Divine Lord teach the whole lesson on this subject. It is the coming of each soul in a personal application directly to Christ, by which it obtains life; and in obtaining life by this application it becomes united to the living stone, Christ Jesus, and by that union it is built up as part and parcel of the Spiritual House. Its coming to Christ is its life, its deriving life from Christ is its union unto him; and in that very union unto Christ is involved its being built up in his true church.

It is of great importance to the view we have taken in regard to our union with Christ, that we be very clear upon one point,—I mean that act by which, *instrumentally*, we are built upon Christ. It may have been mentioned incidentally before, but it is well to speak of it more fully now. What shall we understand by *coming* to Christ? St. Peter explains it immediately after he uses the words "to whom coming." "Wherefore, also," he says, "it is contained in Scripture, Behold, I lay in Zion a Chief Corner Stone, elect and precious; and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded." Hence there can be no question that believing on Christ is of the same meaning with the previous expression, *coming* unto him. Hence the Apostle proceeds in the next verse to say, "Unto you, therefore, which *believe* he is precious." The act of *faith*, then, is that which puts us in possession of all the preciousness of Christ. "Faith,"

says the eminent Hooker, "is the ground and the glory of all the welfare of this building. That which linketh Christ to us, is his mere mercy and love toward us. That which tieth us to him is our *faith* in the promised *salvation* revealed in his Word of Truth."

We may be brought nigh, in a certain sense, to the one foundation; Ordinances and Sacraments may set us down, as it were, immediately by it, and may put us into *visible* connexion therewith, as *visible* members of the church; but after all, we shall be but as so many loose stones, without bonds, without life, having no real union with the true church or with Christ, until we begin to exercise a living faith in Him as all our life.

The doctrine is maintained by many who sympathize with what are called Tractarian or Puseyite writers in England, that Christ has given the whole administration of his grace to his church,—which, in this sense, is called "his fulness;" that the church, by Priesthood or Sacraments, gives to every man the grace furnished by Christ, as each has need; that to this end, when the church was established on the day of Pentecost, all the fulness of Christ, all his grace for his people was invested in his church, as a corporate, spiritual institution, to hold that sacred property and use it as Christ's Steward. Consequently, that when a sinner is said to come to Christ, the meaning is that he comes to the church as *his* representative and agent, possessed of plenipotentary powers to act in his stead. In this case the sinner is made a living stone, not by being brought directly to that great living Corner Stone, which is "laid in Zion," but to a building erected on that stone, which, itself, has all its life, and represents it.

Now this, we have no hesitancy in saying, is a terrible perversion of the gospel, and a shameful denial of the most precious privileges of the believer. It is nothing less than taking the sinner to *man* instead of *God*. It is the precious birth-right of the believer to cease from man, to look above ordinances, to see without any intervening cloud or medium, the Lamb of God; to come as directly to him as if there were not a sacrament or ordinance, or ministry on earth, and be built up in Him as immediately as if not a soul had been built up in Him before. In other words, precisely as the first souls that were united by faith to that living Corner Stone, could have none between them and Christ, no row of intervening stones; so all believers, to the end of the world, are united just as immediately. The mere *incidental* difference that some are converted in one century, some in another, makes no difference as to the privilege of any. All are alike, built *immediately* on Christ. All are equally in the Head. All have the same directness of communion with Him. All receive alike out of his fulness.

III. This church is called the house of God. There are three accounts on which any one may call a house his. He may be the builder of it, or he may be its builder and proprietor, or, if neither of these two, he may be its inhabitant, or he may be all these, and then it will be emphatically his, his to the exclusion of all other claimants. And for this three-fold reason is the true church said to be the Lord's house.

1. He is the Builder of it. The plan, progress, and completion of the Church must be attributed to his wisdom, love and power. From his infinite love sprang the conception of the Church, and from his

omnipotent and gracious power its continued success. Every part of the Church has its origin in God. He gave the law, the doctrines and the promises. He gave the Son and the Spirit. He gave the pardoning mercy and the sanctifying grace. He raised the prophets, and Apostles, and Evangelists, and Teachers, and Pastors, and inspired them for their work. He gave a written constitution under which it exists. He gave it a complete system of doctrine which it must believe. He instituted a government which it must administer and a worship which it must observe. Every office-bearer in this house is appointed by him. He gave the Sacraments and the Sabbath, the Spirit and the doctrines, the rulers and the courts. All the gifts and graces that have ever adorned the hearts and lives of all the christians that have lived, and labored, and died in successive centuries of the Church's history have been wrought and imparted by God's gracious power.

2. God is also the owner of this house. The title of ownership, founded upon creation, is the highest, strongest and best. Whatever we make or fashion is *our* property in the highest degree in which any thing can be ours. God, it is to be remembered, however, not only made but created the heavens and the earth and all things they contain; not only made the work but the *materials*. Hence his property is plainly superior and paramount to all others, and He is Proprietor in a higher sense than any other being can be. His property extends to all beings animate and inanimate, rational and irrational, to atoms, vegetables, animals, men and angels, in the same absolute manner. As it is with regard to all other things, so it is with re-

gard to his Church. He is the absolute owner of it because he imparted life to it originally, and because, by his constant inspiration, he perpetuates that life. "This people, says he, I have formed for myself." The true Church, therefore, in every age, under whatever name or garb it may appear, is God's Church. He and He alone is therefore its Prophet, Priest and King. His law, his word, and his Spirit alone, should have any authority in it or over it. It must be obedient to God's will. It must do God's work, and aim at God's glory.

3. God is the great inhabitant of this house. Being the Builder and the owner, God graciously condescends to occupy and fill it with his presence. Unbelief had shut God out from the souls of men. His being, his presence, were not recognized and therefore men were not influenced or controlled by his authority. But God with a loving heart took upon himself man's nature, and by a series of wonderful manifestations constrained him to a recognition of his presence and claims. Wherever and whenever God's gracious presence and claims as revealed through Christ, are truly and cordially recognized, there is God's house. Such persons become an habitation of God through the Spirit. What a sublime thought is this! God dwells in the highest heavens. The heaven of heaven's cannot contain him. His presence fills the universe, yet he dwells in the midst of his Church as its glory and blessedness. Here he sanctifies unto himself a Place. Here he has a great high throne of believers. Here he holds audience and scatters munificently around him the blessings of his grace. Should he withdraw himself from it, its life, and beauty, and power, and usefulness, would be gone forever.

In regard to this Church, which is the only Church that is visible in a Christian sense; visible in the sense of reflecting the glory of its divine head, I would remark that it is not to be confounded with those ecclesiastical organizations of different denominations which exist over the world. An outward profession or submission to baptism may admit to these, but it must be something inward and spiritual; in fact a new spiritual birth, that must be experienced in order to secure admission to this. No outward rite or ordinance can introduce a person into this holy enclosure. Christ is the door and Christ is the way. We must be born again by the power of the Divine Spirit or we cannot enter here. How blind must men be to the real nature of this spiritual house to suppose that outward baptism can effect or secure an entrance. Some of the vilest men that ever lived were baptised men. Scarcely had baptism been instituted as a Christian rite, when two persons who had received it, were stricken down with a lie on their lips by an angry God.

Baptism in the Christian dispensation, is the substitute for circumcision in the Jewish Economy, and answers to the same end. Like it, it admits into what is called the visible Church, (not the Church of Christ about which we have been speaking,) like it, it is the badge of profession, like it symbolizes or typifies the sanctification of the soul, like it, it is the solemn seal by which God ratifies his promises to those who inwardly, believingly and heartily accept them, whilst like circumcision, which *did not* renew the soul, but typified the necessary "circumcision of the heart in the spirit," so Baptism is a type (and no more) of the necessary purification of the inward man, "an out-

ward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." "He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly, neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh, but he is a Jew which is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter, whose praise is not of men, but of God." As a sign and seal there must be something *within* the person of which Baptism is the sign and seal before it can be scripturally applied. The commencement and maintenance of our spiritual life, instead of being attributed to baptism, as errorists would teach, is uniformly attributed to the reception of the Divine word into our hearts by *faith*. "As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to as many as believe on his name." "He that believeth in me hath everlasting life." "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life" "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." "He that hath the Son hath life." "He that believeth on the Son of God, hath the witness in himself."

Whatever then be the means employed, whether the office of preaching, the ordinances of the Church, the dispensations of Providence, the examples of pious persons, the admonitions of the godly, or whatever else; they are only the various means by which the *revealed word*, as an instrument, is brought into contact with the mind. By the word of God which is the *Truth*, the mind is enlightened, and the soul is transformed. "Beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, we are changed into the same image from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord."

Thus our *recovery* corresponds with our *ruin*, each being achieved by perfectly antagonistical principles. The

instrument which affects the one is totally opposed to that which produces the other. It was not by any physical change of his nature that man became an apostate creature, but by a moral force operating upon and disturbing his intellectual faculties. So his restoration is not accomplished by any material agent or influence acting magically or miraculously upon his body, but by spiritual energy affecting the thinking soul. By the reception of *error* into the mind, all the moral faculties of the first man become perverted and corrupted, and he was estranged from God. By the reception of *truth* into his heart, the moral faculties of the believer are renewed, and the image of God is restored to his soul. The word of *falsehood* was the instrument by which Satan, the father of lies, introduced death into the world. The word of *truth* is the instrument by which Jesus who is "Amen, the faithful and true witness," begets us again to eternal life.

If this false dogma, "that Baptism is the only means of spiritual renewal, a sacrament necessary to salvation, and the administration of it made to depend on a priesthood of so-called Apostolical Succession" be admitted, there is no error however great in the delusions of the apostate Church of Rome to which it will not necessarily lead. This is the entering wedge which disposes the mind for the reception of the dogma of transubstantiation. There are no greater difficulties in the one than in the other. Admit this one error, and there is nothing so monstrous to which it will not give birth. Every other error, like the fabled brood of the serpent, will spring up ready armed. If we would avoid grosser errors we must guard against those which are incipient.

In conclusion, I would remark that this Church—this true Church—about which we have been speaking, and with which we must be united, or perish, is the only Church which is certain to endure to the end. It has had a being ever since its first birth until the present. Its record, although not known upon earth, is on high. Its history, although it may not include Popes, and Cardinals, and Bishops, and Priests, and Monks, and Friars, will appear hereafter. Nothing can altogether overthrow and destroy it. Its members may be persecuted, oppressed, imprisoned, beaten, beheaded, burned, but the Church itself is never altogether extinguished. It rises again from its afflictions. It lives on through fire and water. When crushed in one land it springs up in another. The Pharaohs, the Herods, the Neros, the Julians, the Diocletians, the bloody Marys have labored in vain to put it down. This Church outlives them all, and sees them buried each in its turn. It is an anvil that has broken many a hammer in this world, and will break many a hammer still. It is a bush which is often burning, and yet never consumed.

